



Choosing VET: aspirations, intentions and choice

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INTRODUCTION

This summary brings together the findings from two research projects: *Choosing VET: investigating the VET aspirations of school students* and *In their words: student choice in training markets – Victorian examples*.

The research investigated school students' post-school aspirations for vocational education and training (VET), the drivers influencing their thinking and behaviour, and awareness of vocational training options and career pathways, as well as how post-school choices are made in a competitive training market. Importantly, both studies directly capture the voice of students. Wider discussions also took place in school and VET communities – with parents, teachers and trainers. The terms TAFE (technical and further education) and VET are used interchangeably, as this is how students talk about the sector.

Choosing VET: investigating the VET aspirations of school students surveyed students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 about their occupational and educational aspirations, with the survey repeated every year until the Year 9 group reached Year 12. The study focused on students who signalled an interest in VET in a sample of 6492 students from Years 3 to 12 in New South Wales government schools over a four-year period. The project was undertaken by Jenny Gore and a team of researchers from The University of Newcastle and Western Sydney University.

In their words: student choice in training markets – Victorian examples interviewed VET students about their experiences choosing a training provider and course. The research explores the extent to which the consumer model of training, aimed at increasing student choice, is changing the dynamics between prospective students and registered training organisations (RTOs). The project was undertaken by Justin Brown, from the Australian Centre for Educational Research.

PERCEPTIONS AND EARLY ASPIRATIONS

School students most commonly identified that their preferred occupation must be enjoyable and interesting – citing actual experience with or exposure to a VET occupation as an aspirational trigger.

Key messages

- Fewer school students hold aspirations for VET than for university, but slightly more of them aspired to VET than to ceasing formal education after high school. Almost a quarter of students did not know what level of education they planned to complete.
- There is a higher interest in VET-related jobs than in VET post-school pathways, indicating a misalignment between students' occupational interests and their educational aspirations, and lack of understanding about the role of vocational education.
- Both formal and informal opportunities to experience tangible VET-related occupations in practice are important motivators for students.
- Gender stereotypes permeate student ideas about their futures, particularly with regard to career choice; 'traditional' male and female occupations dominate the lists for both boys and girls.
- Primary and junior secondary students seem to have formed negative perceptions of VET or TAFE (technical and further education), and their views of TAFE do not reflect contemporary realities.
- While VET is positively seen as offering practical and work-related learning to students, negative views of VET/TAFE exist at the primary and secondary school levels in relation to the value, prestige and importance of VET/TAFE study. Negative views can strengthen in the latter years of schooling.

Educational and occupational aspirations of school students

When talking about their occupational aspirations, school students most commonly identified that their preferred occupation must be enjoyable and interesting. Over the period of the survey, student aspirations for VET were largely 'steady' (the student expressed interest in VET in every survey) or 'moving towards' VET (first expressed interest in a non-VET pathway, then interest in VET in each subsequent survey). However, a notable proportion of students are 'moving away' from VET (expressed interest in VET in the first survey but not in subsequent surveys).

Students interested in a vocational occupation cite actual experiences with, or exposure to, the occupation. This trigger is absent among the most popular reasons given for university-related occupation choice.

Younger children give informal examples as reasons for pursuing VET-related careers, such as styling classmates' hair or cooking with relatives. Older students cite exposure to VET-related occupations through initiatives such as the VET in Schools program (VETiS) influencing their aspiration and choice of educational pathway. This demonstrates the importance of exposing children from a young age to a range of formal and informal career-related experiences during school.

Gendered stereotypes about occupations still have a strong influence on students from a very young age. Female students name occupations such as hairdresser, beauty therapist and child carer, occupations absent from the popular choices for male students. Instead, popular choices for male students are motor mechanic, electrician and carpenter. Male students are more likely than female students to express interest in a VET-related occupation. Occupations such as sportsperson, police officer, defence force member and animal attendant/trainer are popular among both female and male students.

While there has been a long history of concerted effort to address the gendered nature of career choice, new efforts by schools, VET providers and industry may be needed if change is to occur. Some students indicated to the researchers that their school organised TAFE excursions for them to try out different courses, but the girls had to do hairdressing and the boys had construction-related experiences. Exposing all students to a broad range of options may be important in preventing their options being narrowed by inadvertently reinforcing gender stereotypes.

Misalignment between occupational aspiration and educational aspiration

School students who indicate an interest in a vocational occupation are not always clear about the education or training required. More students aspire to pursue a VET-related career than intend to undertake a VET course, revealing a clear misalignment between the training they intend to pursue and their occupational choice, most evident in young students. Some mistakenly believe they require a university degree for a VET-related occupation, including aspiring hairdressers who thought they required a university qualification, and aspiring surgeons who intended studying at TAFE. Among older secondary students such misalignment had decreased but was still evident.

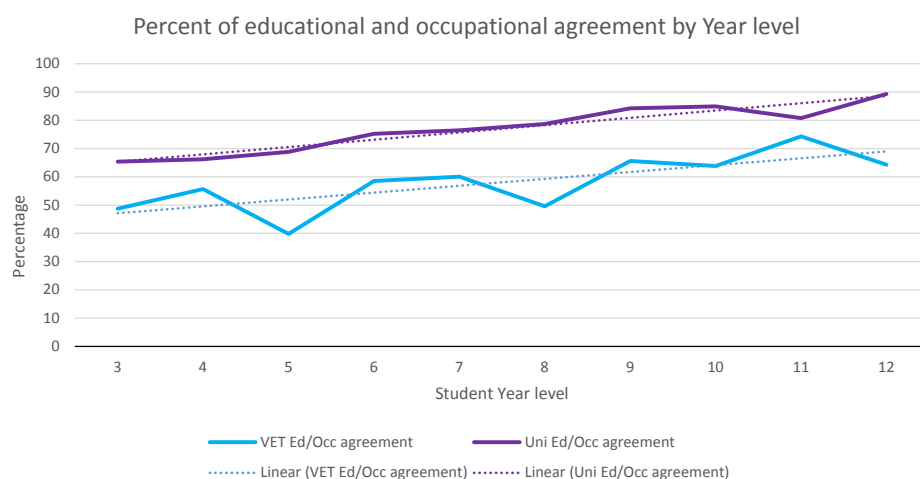
Figure 1 depicts the percentage of alignment, or agreement, between students' educational and occupational aspirations, comparing students naming VET as their highest educational intention and students naming university. It shows, for example, that nearly 50% of the Year 3 students who

School students who indicate an interest in a vocational occupation are not always clear about the education or training required.

By Year 12 alignment between educational pathway and occupational aspirations is weaker for students intending to pursue a VET-related career than for those on the education pathway to a university-related occupation.

indicated VET as their educational pathway named an occupation that aligns with a VET qualification, while the alignment for the Year 3 students who indicated a university pathway is closer to 65%.

Figure 1 Educational and occupational aspiration alignment



Alignment between the intended occupation and education pathway does increase by year level. Yet, it remains the case that by Year 12 alignment between educational pathway and occupational aspirations is weaker for students intending to pursue a VET-related career than for those on the education pathway to a university-related occupation.

The figure also clearly demonstrates the extent to which those students thinking about a VET-related career appear to ‘struggle’ with their choice. It would appear many students lack clear and accurate information about the VET sector. It suggests that schools and/or VET providers have more to do in ensuring that students and their parents or carers have a greater awareness of the range of education choices that vocational training offers and where they might lead. Students need to be provided with or have access to up-to-date information about the qualifications needed to enter their prospective occupations and the various pathways to obtain these qualifications.

School student perceptions of VET

There is a strong and positive response from students about the idea that VET represents a form of practical and hands-on learning. Many students share this perception and it is a driver for student interest in VET pathways. Course components that support this, such as work placement, are highlighted as being valuable. Students also mention the employment prospects they believe VET could offer as another reason for choosing a VET pathway. Despite this, there still is an evident stigma associated with VET, which some described as the option for people ‘not good enough’ to attend university.

The idea that choosing a VET pathway meant a student had in some way not performed ‘well enough’ was also flagged. Some students appear to have preconceived ideas that VET is a place for lower academic achievers; these opinions were held by students with lower academic performance and a lower perception of their performance relative to their peers. These students are more likely to express interest in a VET pathway.

Issues were also raised about the practice of schools heavily promoting university education following school. Students point out the detrimental effect this may have for those who were not interested in or able to pursue a university pathway. There is also a perception that VET institutions do not have the same prestige as universities. Relatedly, students are concerned a VET qualification will not provide them with a competitive edge in the labour market.

Students mention that they mainly rely on advice and information from family, friends and peers about post-school education. Often this information is outdated and reinforces the misconceptions surrounding the benefits of a VET pathway. This highlights the importance of informing families and community groups about the benefits of VET for students and ensuring the dissemination of contemporary and accurate accounts of vocational training both within and beyond school communities.

Often the information from family, friends and peers about post-school education is outdated and reinforces misconceptions surrounding the benefits of VET.

Positive attributes of VET

- Practical - ‘learning’ what you are going to do instead of ‘studying’
- Accessibility *
- Affordability
- Opportunity
- VET in Schools

Concerns about VET

- Lacks prestige
- Does not provide a competitive edge
- University more likely to lead to success
- Disapproval from parents
- ‘Types’ of people who go to TAFE
- Affordability *

* Affordability was identified as both a positive, in terms of the perception of fees being lower compared to University and a negative, in terms of fees, especially if ‘up-front’, being a barrier to access.

FROM ASPIRATION TO REALITY – CHOOSING VET STUDY

While choice is a necessary component of a well-functioning competitive training market, the research suggests that segments of the VET student population lack both access to choice and control over their choice of course and RTO.

Key messages

- The task of choosing a course of VET study is a complex one.
- The factors that matter most to students are: training location; those offering advice and information (trusted influencers); timetables; fees and affordability; and the perceived quality of the training provider.
- Ultimately, many students have limited control over choice, given that influential factors such as location, timetables, course content and fees are ‘fixed’ – often there is ‘no or very limited’ choice.
- Prospective students feel they lack reliable, trustworthy and independent information on VET providers.
- Students are frustrated by the lack of customisation available in the course and provider information to make it relevant to their needs.
- There is uncertainty over the financial support available to those considering a VET pathway.
- The value and impact of on-line and searchable VET information web sites, whilst useful, can be overwhelming in complexity and of themselves do not drive student decisions.

How choices are made

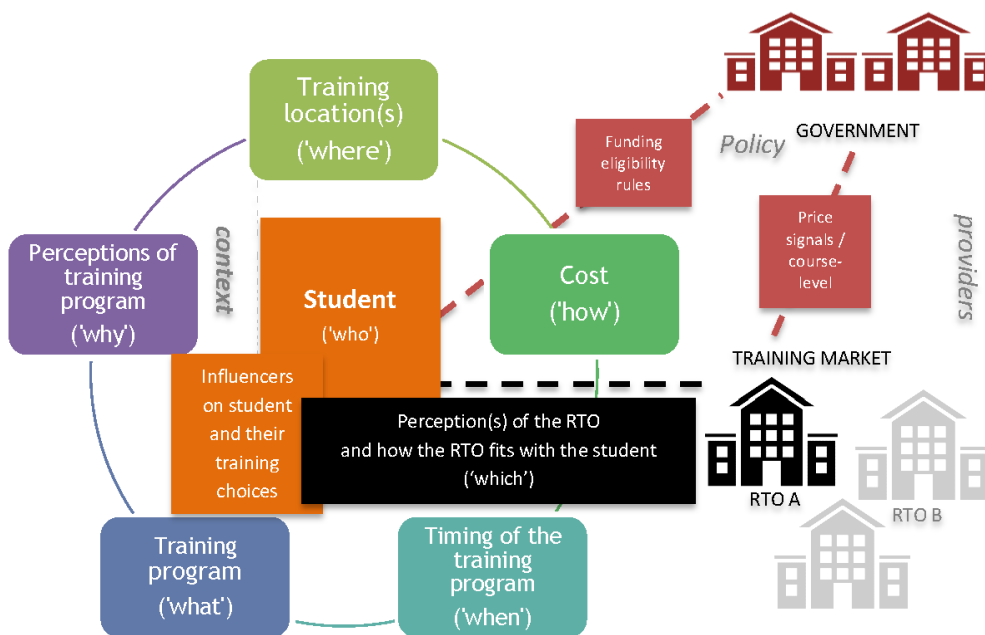
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If a student does decide a VET pathway is suitable for them, the process of choosing a VET provider is rarely simple and straightforward. A complex range of factors affect the final choice. Figure 2 shows how complex ‘choosing VET’ really is, and highlights both the range of factors influencing choice and how they can interact.

Different students give precedence to different factors, with particular factors consistently arising as important. Students consider what field they want to study, what qualification they need in that field, where that qualification is available and what particular training organisation meets their needs. The factors are not necessarily considered in any particular order or with importance consistently given to one particular factor. These choices rely on the quality of the information available to answer each question, and where that information comes from.

Governments and RTOs have a role in defining these factors, as does necessarily the general socioeconomic context in which the student resides. Each factor can be made up of a number of different elements and will vary between students.

Figure 2 The process of choosing VET



The factors that matter most to students are: training location; those offering advice and information (trusted influencers); timetables; fees and affordability; and the perceived quality of the training provider.

The diagram shows how a decision might be made by a student who has access to a large range of options, but this is not the case for many students. Students in metropolitan areas report less concern around the locations of providers, with a larger range of local providers and ready access to public transport. In inner and outer regional areas location is a greater factor, where the choice of training provider and course is severely limited. A student may be compelled to undertake a course with a particular provider, despite negative word-of-mouth associated with a course or the provider, because no other options are easily available.

Where the training program itself is being considered, a key factor is the number of hours the course takes to complete. Shorter courses might seem more attractive to some, but students may have concerns about the quality of the education a shorter course provides. The length of important elements within the course, for example, work placement, is also considered. When young students are being guided by schools or other agencies towards high-quality courses, they are willing to try out different course options to determine what interests them the most. For mature-age students there is less flexibility in relation to location and course availability – travelling too far from family or other commitments and timetabling are paramount concerns.

Choice for students may involve weighing up the benefits of travelling much further for a course that may or may not be superior in quality to the local offerings. This is very different from the idea of an individual being able to consider a number of possible options and choosing the one most suited to them. Compromises are also made in the area of course timing. Some students are forced to undertake a full-time delivery mode in a particular course

Students express reluctance to rely on the information offered by training providers about their courses, timetables and fees.

because it is the only option available, despite it being less suitable for the student. Ultimately, choice for many students is limited, with few or no viable options in the area they wish to study.

Navigating the VET system

There are currently a number of resources designed to assist prospective VET students to make more informed choices about VET pathways. These range from websites like myskills.gov and the Victorian Skills Gateway, to checklists attempting to guide students through the process of selecting a training provider and course, for example, that offered by the Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA). Despite these aids, students continue to report that they find it difficult to access clear and reliable information about VET providers and options. Many are not aware of the existence of these resources or find them too complex to navigate. Students want tools that can be quickly customised to their experience and situation, to allow them to see what options are viable for them.

Students express reluctance to rely on the information provided by training providers about their courses, timetable and fees, believing that they shouldn't rely solely on information offered by providers. Students also articulate the need for reliable information about the actual cost of the course and the upfront fee, as well as specific information on the course content. Course fee information presented on the websites of training providers is not seen as reliable. Apart from information about fees and costs, students sometimes find the timetabling information on training providers' websites inadequate. Many students, and particularly mature-age students, want to identify courses with timetables that suit their needs.

Students find it difficult to determine, prior to enrolling, exactly what kind of loans or subsidies they are eligible for, with information lacking on the financial support available to those undertaking a VET program. They report difficulties in accessing financial supports through agencies such as Centrelink, finding it complicated. Students may be in danger of losing assistance because of the difficulty of communicating their study load and financial needs to support organisations. They need information on options such as flexible payment plans, which remove the burden of large up-front fees. Some students claim that without this option they would have been unable to study. This indicates there may be a role for training providers or an independent body in making students aware of the financial support available and helping to guide students through the process of applying for support.

Students who wish to work indicate concern over their capacity to support themselves while undertaking VET study. The issue of low wages is raised

as a factor deterring students from taking up apprenticeships. Greater effort and attention may be required to provide students with options for financial support or with assistance to identify ways in which training could be undertaken while the student continues part-time employment. This is of particular importance for students who lack financial support from their family as they undertake study. As noted earlier, options such as part-time study are often not available in regional areas, making achieving a work–study balance difficult for these students.

There is a gap between the information provided and the information students require and trust.

Information is key

There is currently a gap between the information provided to prospective students and the information these students require and trust. While governments and providers make information available to students to assist them to make choices about their VET pathways, this information is clearly not always accessed or received – and trusted – by students. Addressing this gap is critical to improving the process and outcomes of VET choice for students. A key element of this is the ability of students to customise the information and tools to their particular needs. Students have widely varying access to choice in the VET marketplace, and the information being given to them needs to take this into account.

The current system-level measures of performance used by governments for public accountability may be helpful for prospective students. This kind of information could be useful for evaluating the quality of a training provider or course, given that students indicate an interest in accessing performance data, provided it comes from a trustworthy, independent source. However, the current format of these measures may not be suitable for many prospective students. Information needs to be presented in a way that enables students across a range of ages and backgrounds to access it with ease. Tools and information sources then need to be promoted to increase awareness of their existence as reliable and trustworthy tools for assisting with VET choice.

CONCLUSION

Gender stereotypes permeate student ideas about their futures. Funding policies that support students in a diverse range of experiences may also support female participation in non-traditional areas and in VET overall.

The ideal of student choice in VET as envisaged within policy documents does not fully accord with practical reality. Limitations are such that not all students have access to an optimal array of options from which to make a choice. Students are not simply turning away from VET-related occupations as being undesirable: students do form aspirations for VET-related occupations at a range of ages, but they need better assistance to make that choice. Better information delivered to these students can help them to match their occupational aspirations with their educational aspirations.

The most significant insight from this research is the need for students to have more reliable, up-to-date and trustworthy information about VET options, and that this information needs to be presented in a format the student can understand. This information should be provided throughout the educational experience of students, beginning early in primary school, to enable them to seriously consider VET-related careers and VET pathways as an option to enable personal success.

Key implications

For government and policy-makers

- The choices facing students seeking VET could be improved by supporting a wider range of courses and providers in inner and outer regional areas.
- There is a desire for trustworthy sources of information on VET providers, which could include:
 - the full price of the course
 - measurements of the quality of the course
 - links to the labour market opportunities in the area.
- Students need clear information about the loans, subsidies or exemptions available, along with rules or eligibility criteria and how to access them.
- Gender stereotypes permeate student ideas about their futures. Funding policies that support students in a diverse range of experiences may also support female participation in non-traditional areas and in VET overall.
- Policy that strengthens the appeal of VET might be critical to the sector. Recent gains made in university enrolment of students from equity target groups through the widening participation agenda, together with credential inflation may be impacting on the level of interest in VET. Policies that enhance opportunities for VET as a pathway to higher education and which increase opportunities for achieving degrees through VET study may be important in developing student interest and participation in the VET sector.

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- Policy that supports the promotion of VET opportunities and pathways, highlighting the significant range of options available to students, is important in overcoming the negative perceptions of VET held by many students and their teachers.

For vocational training providers

- Students would benefit from a wider range of course, fee and location options, particularly in rural and remote areas.
- Access to information on VET in different age-appropriate formats is important, as VET aspirations are formed during primary and secondary school.
- Elements such as work placement and hands-on exercises are seen as valuable by students and should be included and promoted in courses where appropriate.
- Steps may need to be taken to revitalise the information provided through training provider websites as it is not seen by students as reliable and trustworthy.

For schools

- Primary and secondary schools, leaders and teachers, have a significant role to play in the timing and substance of careers education, particularly related to VET study and careers requiring VET qualifications; high-quality and up-to-date careers guidance will assist in overcoming often outdated perceptions of the sector.
- Exposure to a broad range of occupation-related experiences in either formal or informal formats can assist students to form occupational aspirations.
- Efforts to reduce the gendered stereotyping of certain careers may enable students to access a wider range of occupational options to aspire to.
- In order to improve perceptions and attitudes towards VET, care should be taken in schools to present VET as a worthwhile and quality option for further education.
- Schools have a role to play in maintaining awareness of contemporary notions of VET and in educating parents/carers and other influencers accordingly. Adopting such a role may reduce some of the uncertainty students voice about VET pathways and occupations.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

This work is based on two research projects:

Choosing VET: investigating the VET aspirations of school students, conducted by Jennifer Gore, Hywel Ellis, Leanne Fray, Maxwell Smith, Adam Lloyd, Carly Berrigan, Andrew Lyell and Natasha Weaver, University of Newcastle, and Kathryn Holmes, Western Sydney University [part of an Australian Research Council Linkage Project 2012-2015]

In their words: student choice in training markets – Victorian examples, conducted by Justin Brown, Australian Council for Educational Research

For more information, see the final reports, available at <<https://www.ncver.edu.au>>.

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